

EDITORIAL

Acting to stop truancy

It's simple logic: when kids aren't in school they probably aren't learning.

Carry that thought a step further and if kids aren't learning they are likely to fall behind in school and jeopardize their chances of graduating. It's not much of a leap from there to conclude not only may they never complete high school but that they have seriously limited their lifetime opportunities.

That's why we are so excited by the latest of efforts to deal with truancy.

Last week, Family Court Chief Judge Jeremiah S. Jeremiah and the Community College of Rhode Island announced a new effort directed at improving the opportunities of those children who have displayed a tendency to miss school.

Under a three-year contract, the court will refer truant youths and their families to the college on Saturdays. At the Knight Campus students will explore personal interests, discuss how to build self-confidence and think about career paths. In addition, the truant students will be paired with college students who will serve as their mentors. As the students are working, their parents will be attending workshops on effective communication techniques, conflict resolution, alternatives to punishment and understanding responsibility.

This sounds like a lot of headwork and is sure to have kids yawning and their parents checking their watches. Each cycle of the program will last four weeks.

No question, making the program engaging and meaningful for those who are court-directed to attend will be challenging. That may prove impossible for all the participants. But to assume truancy is hopeless and that regardless of what efforts are made many will fall by the side is a fallacy.

Judge Jeremiah has already proven that when special attention is paid to truant students, special things happen. The judge has brought the court to 20 middle schools in 14 communities. Last year, 480 students appeared before a truancy magistrate. Over the year they displayed a 20 percent improvement in their grades and a 71 percent improvement in academic achievement. That happened because kids were back in class. It was also happening because these children and their families were made a priority.

The Stop Truancy Outreach Program is an extension of the Family Truancy Court. It is unique and may well become a model for other states.

There's the risk, too, that the program may fail. But to do nothing and be content with the strides made so far is a greater mistake.